

The Screwball Bromance: Regression, Bisexuality, and Reconfigured Masculinity in *Step Brothers*

Journal of Men's Studies

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/1060826515624412

men.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article argues that the 2008 movie *Step Brothers* subverts the classical form of the screwball comedy, which always presents the outcome of heterosexual marriage. Instead, *Step Brothers* presents a love story between the two main male characters. Despite its “low” comedic form, the film is ultimately a sophisticated rumination on the status of male love within 21st-century America as well as the latest iteration of the contemporary “bromance” film.

Keywords

Will Ferrell, bromance film, masculinity, screwball comedy, contemporary Hollywood, romance

Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it's socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological constitution; it is created in our culture. In fact, the search for a transcendent, timeless definition of manhood is itself a sociological phenomenon—we tend to search for the timeless and eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work and the new definitions are yet to be firmly established.

—Michael Kimmel —*Manhood in America* (Kimmel, 1996, p. 5)

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Dale Doback: Dad, we're men. That means a few things—we like to shit with the door open, we talk about pussy, we go on riverboat gambling trips, and we make our own beef jerky. That's what we do, and now that is all wrecked.

[brief pause]

Dr. Robert Doback: We literally have never done any of those things.

—Dale (John C. Reilly) to his father Robert (Richard Jenkins) in
Step Brothers (Apatow & McKay, 2008)

Step Brothers (Apatow & McKay, 2008) is the purest example of the recent wave of so-called bromances and a film that emulates the classic screwball form of comedy. In this sense, it is an example of what I will argue is a hybrid form of classic and current trends, the “screwball bromance.” The story of two 40-year-old “stay at home sons” who are forced to live together when their parents remarry, the film strips down the major issues of this new hybridized genre form—seen in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005), *Superbad* (Apatow & Mottola, 2007), *The Hangover* (Bender & Phillips, 2009), *I Love You Man* (De Line & Hamburg, 2009) among many others—by having its protagonists Brennan Huff (Will Ferrell) and Dale Doback (John C. Reilly) literally act as man-children. In doing so, *Step Brothers* effectively highlights what is at stake in all movies of this new genre—presenting a love story between two male protagonists—as well as highlighting the contradictions within contemporary masculinity by showing two grown men acting out a pre-Oedipal, pre-adolescent and polymorphous bisexuality. According to Geoff King (2002), comic “frisson” is a “departure from the norm,” indicating “our awareness of the precise extent of that departure (p. 68). *Step Brothers*'s comedy is certainly borne from a “departure” from societal “norms” but also shatters boundaries, binding its lead actors within the traditional screwball comedy. The movie is not the first to adopt these strategies but is only the latest step in a longer tradition of comedies that essentially normalize male–male love stories within them.

Step Brothers adopts the form of a classic romantic comedy but transposes it into the “bromantic” mode. Though the film does not present the on-screen depiction of male sexual consummation, the love story between Dale and Brennan is implicit in the level of form and narrative. Thus, *Step Brothers* can be read as an example of Alexander Doty's (1993) queer film text, where an audience can read the film with a particular eye to a “wide range of positions within culture that are ‘queer’ or non-, anti-, or contra-straight” (p. 3). These fissures render the film polysemous—leaving room to interpret the narrative for changing conceptions of manliness and, indeed, queer content. The film includes a critical view of the overdetermined bravado of business culture, but it also questions what it is to be a man in present-day America. It does so by presenting an inclusive, non-judgmental male love story. *Step Brothers* offers an aspirational model for 21st-century manliness, a template for following unorthodox dreams, and a critique of capitalist and heteronormative ideology.

Arguing that *Step Brothers* is essentially a romantic comedy means exploring how it both embodies and resists the traits of the genre. A resurgence of scholarship about

the romantic comedy highlights the changes to male/female relationships since the heyday of classic Hollywood when the screwball comedy emerged as a genre. Jeffers McDonald's (2007) *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Claire Mortimer's (2010) *Romantic Comedy*, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's (2007) *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, and Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermy's (2009) edited collection, titled *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, all account for recent female-centric evolutions of the genre, as seen in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding & Maguire, 2001), *Sex in the City* (Busby & King, 2008), and *13 Going on 30* (Kolsrud & Winick, 2004) among other exemplary texts. Even more recently, interest in the "bromance" or "homme-com" reflects upon the corresponding genre in film. John Alberti (2013), Michael DeAngelis (2014), Lesley Harbidge (2012), and others link changes in male/female relationships in the feminist and later, postfeminist eras to particular works within the comedy genre. McDonald (2007), for instance, acknowledges the changes to the hero within these films, in addition to the shifts between screwball and romantic modes of the genre. Furthermore, McDonald acknowledges a growing divide between the kinds of movies marketed to men and women, especially those transposed into the "buddy" category of films that emerged in the 1970s onward.

DeAngelis's (2014) overview of the bromance traces the genre's emergence within the context of cultural discourse, where the wider acceptance of close male friendships in contemporary society stand at odds with the disavowal of homosexual romance within them. This discourse "manifests itself through genre" providing a "litmus test for discerning not only the extent to which homosexuality has been assimilated in contemporary culture" but more importantly the "degree of comfort (or discomfort) that this culture actually experiences with such assimilated homosexuality" (DeAngelis, 2014, pp. 14-15). For DeAngelis, what is at stake is an acknowledgment of the material that the genre borrows from explicitly homosexual texts, while supplanting it so that the male protagonists can ultimately be better boyfriends and husbands. Likewise, Alberti locates this analysis in the recent wave of films that he credits to Judd Apatow and his productions. For Alberti, what is important about these films is the way they open up possibilities for "other types of relationships" within previously rigid boundaries of gender and heteronormativity. He suggests that "these films reach ambiguous and even contradictory conclusions" that comment on the "ongoing nature of this evolutionary process," explaining "why these movies provoke such conflicting critical reactions" (Alberti, 2013, p. 160).

Although there has been a recent wave of scholarship that traces the new contours of the (b)romantic genres, *Step Brothers* remains a paradoxical case study that eludes these frameworks. On the one hand, it is an Apatow-produced vehicle like the case studies Alberti studies, while on the other, it is a much more of a classically defined "meet-cute" or "screwball comedy," merely replacing opposite genders with a male-male partnership. It is also a star vehicle that expresses what R. Colin Tait (2014) has argued is Will Ferrell's "absurd masculinity." The actor's comic persona is tied to exploding and exploiting audience's expectations regarding heterosexual behavior. In this sense, the film also follows Steven Seidman (1981), Lesley Harbidge (2009), Wes

Gehring (1997), and Frank Krutnik's (2003) work on the "comedian comedy" which explains how a particular type of comic actor uses their persona both within text and outside of one. This is certainly true in the case of Ferrell and Reilly in *Step Brothers*. Their working together in several films, including *Talladega Nights: The Legend of Ricky Bobby* (Apatow & McKay, 2006) allows this film to inherit the would-be "friends to lovers" narrative of the previous movie into *Step Brothers*, in addition to building upon the chemistry between the performers (DeAngelis, 2014, p. 3).

Acknowledging the genre's mutation from the heteronormative ideal to a much more fluid and open trope—what Alberti (2013) dubs "other types of [male] relationships" (p. 160)—is an important part of this study as is Harbidge's important work on *The Hangover*. In the case of the classical "screwball" and "comedy of remarriage," heterosexual marriage and coupling was always the resolution, whereas contemporary films present many more opportunities for both genders. Harbidge even goes so far to argue that *The Hangover* is itself a screwball comedy, setting the stage for my present project. Analyzing *Step Brothers* with an eye to multiple interpretations—and especially as a bisexual text—means not only tracing its narrative form but placing the film in a larger historical trajectory. That the film relies on the classical form of the romantic comedy but subverts it by offering a love story between two men indicates how far the genre has mutated and demonstrates its distance from that early model. Dale and Brennan are even less functional in this respect; they have retreated away entirely from adulthood and responsibility. For the audience, this allows them to witness masculinity as it is being constructed, rather than as an endpoint in and of itself. The paradox then is that *Step Brothers* is both "dumber" and more sophisticated in its portrayal of masculinity, its ties to heteronormativity, and its critique of patriarchy.

To argue that *Step Brothers* is an example of what I am dubbing the "screwball bromance," it is also necessary to acknowledge the pioneering work of Stanley Cavell's (1981) *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* and David Shumway's (1991) "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage." Both authors argue that this particular form exclusively constructs the heterosexual couple while eradicating all other possibilities within their narratives (Cavell, 1981; Shumway, 1991). Such a message may have served the 1930s, when these films were popular, but ignores the many fissures within these original texts, as well as assuming that these comic forms were set in stone. As we shall see, *Step Brothers*—and the bromance more generally—is only the latest iteration of the romantic comedy, which is always in transition and tends to be even more sensitive to the changes within a culture. As both authors deal specifically with the Classical era it is necessary that we build on their earlier models to include new narrative content, representation, and economies of desire.

Step Brothers is both a classical romantic comedy and a contemporary revision of the genre. On the level of plot, the film contains the hallmarks of what audiences have come to expect of a contemporary romantic film. Brennan (Ferrell) and Dale (Reilly) are two fortysomething adult children, who have not yet moved out from their parents' houses. When their parents marry each other, the pair are forced to live together in the same bedroom. As in other romantic comedies, they initially hate each other on sight

but then gradually realize what they have in common and become best friends. The pair face external obstacles, such as Brennan's younger and meaner brother Derek (Adam Scott), and real-world obligations, such as the pair needing to get jobs, eventually tear the couple apart, only to have them reunite spectacularly in the end of the film. For his part, Derek is the film's major villain. He traumatized Ferrell's character in his childhood by embarrassing him in front of a school play and continues to browbeat him on a daily basis. Both characters must also overcome their fear of bullies who are responsible for their reversion to childish states.

Aside from some of the odder details in this brief synopsis, the film precisely follows the formal pattern in almost every romantic comedy, except, in this case, (a) the protagonists are grown men stuck in perpetual adolescence and (b) the couple only come together at the end as "best friends" rather than lovers or spouses at the end of the film. These two moves represent substantial changes within the form, despite the stability of the *Step Brothers*'s classical three-act structure. Nevertheless, due to its narrative patterns and content, as well as its belonging to a larger subgenre of bromantic films, it is possible to view *Step Brothers* as wholly open to interpretation as an explicitly queer or bisexual text, in addition to potentially transforming the perceptions and opinions of audiences who view the film's bromantic content.

***Step Brothers* and the Contemporary Bromance**

Step Brothers also participates in a much longer tradition of comedies, all of which question, reflect upon, bump up against, and perhaps transform notions of "normalcy" in society. Opposed to other bromantic films that DeAngelis (2014) describes as "'Male love stor[ies]'" in "scare quotes," *Step Brothers* explicitly follows in the "meet-cute," screwball and the "comedy of remarriage" formula (p. 11). Here, the leads meet, hate each other on sight, get together, grow apart, only to reunite at the end as a (b) romantic couple. Thus, the film reflects expanding representations of masculinity within comedy while deriving much of its humor by positioning itself against hegemonic norms. Through this violation of norms, comedy reveals the utopian desires of a society (Cavell, 1981) opening up possibilities for opposition to the present-day realities while constructing a pleasurable world that exemplifies our hopes and dreams. Not only do Dale and Brennan exist outside of this hegemonic realm—the world of adult responsibility, capitalism, and pressure to succeed—but it is gradually revealed that this opposition, innocence and childlike nature is their main source of strength and appeal, if not the film's.

By returning its leads to a state of arrested development, the film also foregrounds what is ultimately at stake in the bromantic genre, namely, the construction of a new kind of man—a kinder, gentler, and more loving figure than the traditional patriarch. As Robin Wood and others have argued, (Classical) Hollywood film is ultimately all about repression of a fluid and dynamic sexuality in favor of a singular heterosexual (and implicitly patriarchal) version of romance. For Wood (1986), this means "it is because of the way in which our civilization has constructed 'masculinity' upon the repression of constitutional bisexuality . . . that all of our lives are in such jeopardy

today” (p. 3). Wood states that Hollywood’s chief repression is the presence of bisexuality and the possibility of representing it on film (p. 3). The fact that Brennan and Dale both exist in a state of arrested development implies that their characters reside in a world of what Dennis Bingham (1994) refers to as “polymorphous preadolescent sexuality” (p. 9).

According to Bingham (1994), Sigmund Freud’s initial description of bisexuality refers

not just to sexual preference . . . but to an infant’s original possession of what are understood later in life as the traits of both genders, traits repressed by the post-Oedipal construction of gender identities. Revising the masculine persona means deconstructing “masculinity” and revealing man’s identification with his own femininity. (p. 9)

King (2002) takes this relationship a step further, stating that “[t]he realm of comic play might be understood in terms of the Freudian concept of the pre-Oedipal,” which is

the stage in early childhood before we are said to begin to take up what will become our relatively fixed positions (especially sexually) within the grown-up social arena, a process described by Freud in terms of the resolution of the Oedipus complex. (p. 78)

Brennan and Dale’s “polymorphous sexuality” also implies that they remain outside of ideology. Despite the appearance of a heterosexually determined outcome, *Step Brothers* is actually a film about the romance between two men, representing something altogether different in mainstream American cinema. As such, the film has the potential to present alternative forms of love, sexuality, and brotherhood, exemplified within the friendship and chemistry between Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly.

Tait (2014) argues that Will Ferrell’s comic persona is appealing precisely because of its ability to express “absurd masculinity.” Here, Tait examines the actor’s career, highlighting that key to his success is his ability to express “overdetermined and excessively masculine and feminine traits” and the “inability to contain the excesses of either gender” (p. 167). *Step Brothers* uses the gender fluidity within Ferrell’s comic persona here, not simply to create humor but to raise important questions about gender performance writ large. Similarly, Will Ferrell’s collaborations with director Adam McKay and actor Reilly deliberately undermine hegemonic discourses of capitalism and masculinity, in the process revealing the illusory nature of a singular and stable masculine identity. *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Apatow & McKay, 2004), *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (Apatow & McKay, 2006), and *Step Brothers* (Apatow & McKay, 2008) comprise a loose trilogy, each of which provides its own critique of patriarchal society and dominant capitalist ideology. Each of these films follows the classic pattern of the romantic comedy but substitutes relationships between men in place of the traditional heterosexual pairing. The adopted “brotherhood” within each film complicates, expands, and shatters the presumably rigid binary between hetero/homo narratives. Whether seen in Champ Kind’s (David Koechner’s) admission of love for Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman*, the on-screen kiss

between Ricky Bobby and French race car driver Jean Girard (Sasha Baron Cohen) in *Talladega Nights*, or Brennan and Dale's discovery that they would both sleep with John Stamos given the chance, this creative team critiques established notions of American masculine identity by presenting it as absurd, ambiguous, and hilarious.

Examining Will Ferrell's comic persona is central to the critical analysis of the film, as he embodies what Dennis Bingham calls an explicitly "bisexual star persona" (p. 9). On the one hand, Ferrell's bisexuality implies that he is equally appealing to audiences of both genders, while on the other, his broad comedy relies on the twin poles of excessive bravado (Ron Burgundy) and extreme sensitivity (Buddy the Elf from *Elf* [Berg & Favreau, 2003]). In most cases, Ferrell's characters display both masculine and feminine traits within a film, often going so far as to kiss other men in *Old School* (Reitman & Phillips, 2003) and *Talladega Nights*. At the same time, Ferrell's likeability complicates our reception of each trait. His comedy seemingly renders this bisexuality unthreatening, while his persona is built upon critiquing the stability of hegemonic norms. Many of Ferrell's characters just do not measure up to a standard conception of masculinity, resulting in his excessive displays of machismo, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, engaging in saccharine sweetness more commonly associated with the feminine.

We can link Ferrell to a much larger tradition of actors and comedians like Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, and others whose performances were not necessarily inflected with sexuality per se but whose comic roles "celebrate the passage . . . from patriarchal masculinity" into a "polymorphous presocial sexuality" (Bingham, 1994, p. 9). Bingham (1994) notes that Sigmund Freud's definition of bisexuality did not initially refer to "sexual difference" but instead to the "infant's original possession of what are understood later in life as the traits of both genders" (p. 9). Ferrell's ability to go all out in his portrayal of a hysterical yet ambivalent masculinity follows traits described by Bingham as potentially changing the perceived stability of masculine identity by first deconstructing it, then revealing a man's connection to his femininity. The fact that Ferrell's persona relies on inappropriate and ill-timed sweetness, displaying his often nude and non-traditional body type as well as his overtly feminized and masculinized performances, alerts the viewer and critic to the role of destabilization and comic friction within each of the actor's roles.

Ferrell's films are polysemous, yielding multiple interpretations and providing a number of entry points for audience identification. Such an interpretive strategy considers the oppositions throughout a given text, accounting for the antagonisms between characters, in addition to the obstacles they oppose. *Step Brothers*'s turning point occurs when Brennan's brother Derek is introduced. Not only does he behave unconscionably toward Brennan and Dale, but also to his mother and his wife. Brennan retaliates against Derek by punching him in the face, and the step brothers' hatred turns away from each other and toward Derek instead. That Derek epitomizes the successful American male capitalist alerts us to the fact that he is also the object of the film's critique. Thus, following Fredric Jameson (1979), the film presents an allegory for society overcoming the mean-spirited nature of contemporary American patriarchal capitalism and masculinity in favor of a nicer, softer, and, arguably, more feminized brand.

The enormity of these mainstream successes presents us with the opportunity to observe and chart changing notions of masculinity—and perhaps a subtler acceptance of narratives that feature male love stories on-screen. Thus, by exploiting Ferrell's popularity, absurd persona, and box office draw, the films subversively critique outmoded notions of gender on a massive scale. Part of Ferrell's appeal is his bisexual persona, insofar as he is equally appealing to either gender as well as cross between homo- and heterosexual boundaries in all of his movies, sometimes going so far as to French kiss both genders in a single film. As such, he follows in an even longer tradition of other seemingly harmless man-children, such as Jerry Lewis, Pee-Wee Herman, and Adam Sandler.

The mainstream success of all of these comic actors implies that Ferrell's bisexual persona is only the latest iteration in a long line of mainstream figures that have interrogated a seemingly stable version of masculinity. While they interrogate this version of masculinity, however, these films leave less room for women. One of the chief objections to the bromance is the treatment—and more often absence—of women in these films. Admittedly, this is a problem that only multiplies, rather than solves the issue of male dominance at the box office. One response to this question—and indeed the false binary that has emerged in discussions of male versus female comic performers as funny—is to assert that these films seriously reflect, ruminate, and represent different types of men who have traditionally been absent in film (Scott, 2011). This rationale is reflected in Dr. Doback's statement that he has literally never done any of the “manly” things that his son Dale names, nor do many of these actors and characters resemble the traditional “leading man” types.

Step Brothers, then, offers an earnest rumination on “manliness” writ large, provided that we take it seriously. Along these lines, Robin Wood (1986) argues that popular genres “can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of conscious social criticism” and are often even more effective at presenting a collective criticism (p. 70). The screwball bromance assists this greater project in an innovative way, not only by offering different types of masculinity and fluid sexual identities for men and women to emulate but, more importantly, by presenting traditional modes of masculinity, heteronormativity, and patriarchy as patently absurd and undesirable. Recalling Michael Kimmel (1996), whose quote begins this essay, these films participate in the project of making romance among men—as well as traits like weakness, vulnerability, tenderness, and femininity—“visible” and palatable to men as well as presenting alternatives to the bad “masculine” traits within the film—embodied by Derek's capitalist greed, mean-spirited achievement, and misogynist business culture.

Historical Precedents for the Screwball Bromance

As the representation of masculinities in film also corresponds to the changes in comedy in the past 40 years, we can link *Step Brothers* to a longer lineage of comedies that influence, are influenced by, or communicate with one another. While these changes do not always occur on the level of dialogue, they are explicitly linked to generic form,

necessitating that we examine how male–male friendships gradually overlaid the traditional screwball and comedies of remarriage. Understanding how *Step Brothers* absorbs the cultural capital of these romantic comedies and what films modified the form beforehand is a necessary step in understanding gradual changes to the depiction of masculinity within mainstream comedy.

Ferrell's persona corresponds to a larger subcategory that Steve Seidman (1981) refers to as the “comedian comedy.” Thus, he follows in the footsteps of Adam Sandler and Jim Carrey of the 1990s; Eddie Murphy, Robin Williams, and Pee-Wee Herman in the 1980s; Steve Martin and Richard Pryor in the 1970s; as well as the monumental presence of Jerry Lewis in the 1960s—not to mention the anarchic brilliance of the early sound comedians like the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, and Bugs Bunny in the Classical Hollywood era. In each of these performers, we can see a mode of comedy that is instrumental to defining the issues of masculinity in their respective eras, as each stands in the face of convention, simultaneously destabilizing and highlighting the fears inherent in the masculinities in their historical contexts. Similarly, the classic male comedy team helped to redefine the depiction of male friendships on-screen and Abbott and Costello, Crosby and Hope, and Lewis and Martin all presented audiences with a more complex view of the anarchic comedian and his comic foil. This pairing eventually dispersed from the duo to the larger gang of male companions and outsiders, such as unruly fraternities (*Animal House*; Reitman & Landis, 1978), sad-sack platoons (*Stripes*; Goldberg & Reitman, 1981), and nerds (*Revenge of the Nerds*; Bart & Kanew, 1984).

David Bordwell's (2006) discussion of remakes and “allusionism” also prevails in this discussion, particularly as he states “allusions to old movies are expected in virtually every project” (p. 24). Moreover, canonical films of the Classical era were remade as buddy films, replacing women with men and enhancing the male romance story. *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (Brown & Hughes, 1987), for one, is clearly influenced by *It Happened One Night* (Cohn & Capra, 1934), a canonical film in the Classical screwball form, retaining the former film's structure, but becomes a love story between the two male leads Steve Martin and John Candy, rather than the famous romantic coupling between Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable. Following this precedent, other notable male love stories emerged on-screen in the 1980s that featured tender relationships between the young Rudy (Chris Makepeace) and Tripper (Bill Murray) in *Meatballs* (Goldberg & Reitman, 1979), J.J. McClure (Burt Reynolds) and Victor Priznim (Dom DeLouise) in *The Cannonball Run* (Chow & Needham, 1981), and Gilbert and Lewis in *Revenge of the Nerds* as well as Wyatt and Gary in *Weird Science* (Silver & Hughes, 1985).

The bromance often combines trademark scenes and themes from the classical era and incorporating elements of any and all of these films, forming odd pairings and mash-ups of previous material. Not only does *It Happened One Night* become *Planes Trains and Automobiles*, but *Animal House* becomes *Old School* (Reitman & Phillips, 2003), *The Philadelphia Story* (Mankiewicz & Cukor, 1940), another canonical romantic comedy of the classical era, is remade as *Wedding Crashers* (Abrams & Dobkin, 2005). In other words, in addition to featuring male love stories, bromances

pick and choose from other movies that feature male love stories, rewarding or side-stepping an audience's knowledge of predecessor films and embodying Bordwell's (2006) allusionism. Each of these films are historical precedents for the bromance (and for *Step Brothers*) proving that it does not emerge out of nowhere but rather is a product of a long and evolving tradition of comedy fused to changing notions of masculinity writ large. More to the point, these predecessors point to more complex relationships and narrative patterns, each of which paves the ground for the utter transformation of the romantic comedy that occurs with the 2000s wave of bromances.

A brief rundown of recent plots of these bromances highlights these positive aspects of the construction of masculinity, inhabiting the plots of classical romance films, presenting pre-adolescent eruptions of bisexual love, and reinforcing the value of male friendships. In *Old School*, the camaraderie of the latter-day fraternity allows the 30-plus year old males to relive their adolescent fantasies, but ultimately to grow up in the end. In *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005), the title character ends up teaching his straight friends how to be a good man, as all of them are having problems negotiating their excessive masculine traits in the 21st century. Though Andy Sitzer (Steve Carell) begins the story as a loser, it is precisely the innocent and pure qualities of courtship, including being a gentleman, respecting women, and considering other people's feelings, that eventually rub off on his peers, all of whom learn from Andy's better example. Similarly, and despite its pretense of being a romantic comedy, *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007) is actually much more about a latter-day adolescent, Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) growing beyond immature friendships and accepting the responsibilities of adult life. The mournful tone in *Superbad* (Apatow & Mottola, 2007) makes this theme of growing up plain, as the penultimate scene evokes a wistful nostalgia for the unquestioning friendships of adolescence and the entry into "manhood." Furthermore, the film's most touching scene is between two good friends who are clearly in love in one way or another and tell each other that for several minutes on-screen. *I Love You Man* (De Line & Hamburg, 2009) features the romance between Paul Rudd's Peter Klaven and Jason Segal's Sydney Fife, each of whom has lessons to teach the other about "being a real man." Finally, *Funny People* (Apatow, 2009), although thinly disguised as a would-be romance between George Simmons (Adam Sandler) and his ex Laura (Leslie Mann), is actually a love story between George and his young protégé Ira (Seth Rogen). Important too are the lessons learned, not only about being a man but also about being a man who can openly express his love for another man.

Because Judd Apatow produced 10 of these films—including *The Cable Guy* (Apatow & Stiller, 1995), *Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Apatow & Kasdan, 2007), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Apatow & Stiller, 2008), *Step Brothers*, *Pineapple Express* (Apatow & Green, 2008), *Funny People*—he is one of the key figures responsible for continuing to push the boundaries of this genre, and for forming a virtual repertory company of actors, directors, and writers (Alberti, 2013). Ferrell's collaborations with McKay have as much to do with this genre's popularity as Apatow, as Ferrell could be considered not only the most consistently likable figure of this group

but also the biggest box office draw in the 2000s. From the sexless antics of Buddy the Elf (in *Elf*)—whose obsession with Santa Claus, holding hands and saying “I love you” to strangers—through the overdetermined masculine displays of Ron Burgundy, Ferrell’s comedy relies on bringing a newer model of masculinity into sharp relief against the backdrops of indifferent capitalism, changing sexual politics in the workplace, as well as the confines of the institution of marriage as in *Old School*. Ferrell’s persona is male hysteria incarnate—a reactive walking raw wound of emotion, a man out of place and out of time and ultimately incapable of navigating the new gender and societal politics. Ferrell’s brand of comedy is not solely based on this one note, and the missing dimension that surrounds the interpretation of his persona and films is the fact that his characters (like all the protagonists in the bromance films) experience a great deal of growth while retaining their most likable personality traits. In addition, Ferrell’s characters rarely have solid father figures or positive masculine role models, and while they often begin as prime examples of overdetermined masculinity, this is not where they end up at the end of each of these films. Instead, Ferrell’s characters not only learn how to be a better kind of man but also teach those around them the lesson that they learned.

Buddy the Elf and Ricky Bobby start out as children from broken homes where the father has abandoned the son, and reconciliations do not occur until the films’ endings. Some of the characters’ deficiencies are healed by this reconciliation later on in the films. *Talladega Nights* even features a scene where Cal declares his love for Ricky, only to have him not hear it at the end. *Step Brothers* takes this relationship a step further, capitalizing on the real-life friendship and on-screen chemistry between Reilly and Ferrell, as well as indulging in the free reign of romantic play. It is worth repeating that this chemistry is bisexual and polysemous, revealing the fissures inherent in friendship, brotherhood, the hegemonic dominance of patriarchal heterosexuality, as well as being interpretable as precisely that, which may account for the film’s wide appeal among audiences, who can respond to the film in either fashion. More to the point, it speaks to an ongoing trajectory within contemporary American film that features men expressing their unambiguous love for one another, discarding their adolescent trappings and coming to terms with these new forms of masculinity.

Step Brothers as (Queer) Screwball Comedy of Re-Marriage

Step Brothers embodies and resists the classical three-act narrative structure found in the screwball comedy. On the one hand, the dramatic and comedic beats are perfectly timed to the tightly-knit form. On the other, the director McKay, Ferrell, and Reilly build in enough flexibility to accommodate improvisation and happy accidents, in a determinably un-classical strategy. The film follows the familiar conventions of the romantic comedy. Like many of its cinematic and theatrical precedents, the *Step Brothers* features several romantic couples, each of whom end happily in a variation of marriage at the end of the film. The first of these is Brennan and Dale’s cinematic

parents, played by Richard Jenkins and Mary Steenburgen. The revelation that both characters have 40-year-old sons who still live with them actually serves as a point of attraction rather than repulsion for the couple, and the ensuing montage shows the consummation of this relationship, followed by a wedding scene where Brennan and Dale storm out, followed by the first meeting between the two characters. Along the way, the two leads engage in the standard screwball comedy formula, where the couple meets, hate each other, find common ground, lose the common ground, and reunite at the end of the film.

David Shumway (1991) describes of the how romance occurs in more conventional plots. Even though *Step Brothers* is a modified version of this mode, it still retains the major plot points. Similarly, we can use Shumway's assessment that the romantic tale is not only "[u]ltimately about desire played out over an extended plot" but that there is an "object of desire" who is either the man or woman in the film (p. 403). His definition of romance is also useful here, especially as it is played out via "verbal sparring" something that certainly occurs within *Step Brothers*, albeit in a greatly modified fashion (pp. 403-404). Shumway decides that it is "[t]he coincidence of narrative and figural desire that makes the romance so powerfully attractive in a narrative" (p. 400). Shumway decides that heterosexual romance is "the leading line of action in the majority of Hollywood films," (p. 400) a matter that *Step Brothers* resists throughout.

Elaborating *Step Brothers's* difference dictates how far we have come from the classical romance. Indeed, if Shumway's presumption is that mainstream movies have always only presented one form of desire within them, then there has only been one uniform mode of masculinity and heteronormativity in Hollywood. Yet Hollywood has always presented oppositions, resistance, and ambivalences—even within the films that he analyzes. *Step Brothers's* difference from these norms means examining the central issues presented in the screwball comedy, in addition to questioning the hegemony of heterosexual romance, ideology, desire, marriage, sex, and word play. *Step Brothers's* form suggests that there is something more fluid that the classical film suppresses. Instead, the movie merely substitutes a man into the position that a woman formerly occupied just as easily as Bugs Bunny dons a dress, as seen in the Classic *Looney Tunes* offering "What's Opera Doc?" (Seltzer & Jones, 1957) where a bemused Elmer Fudd seemingly falls into Bugs Bunny in drag, or in *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959), which similarly ends with the romance between two men, albeit one in who is dressed like a woman.

If the narrative structure of the film were the only consideration, the film would undoubtedly conform to the classical mode. However, since both of the actors and their roles are coded as possessing stronger traits of one gender over another indicates that the film is having it both ways. Thus, *Step Brothers* also presents a story where a more feminine man falls in love with a more masculine one, accounting for another ambivalent valence for critics and audiences to negotiate. As Brennan is extremely sensitive, he is coded as female in the film. Not only is he more sensitive than Dale, but his arrested development is explained via a flashback, where he first sang in front of a crowd, and they jeered him, shouting that Brennan had a "man-gina." As for Dale, he is immediately coded as extremely "masculine," although this in itself is rendered

problematic later on in the film. In his first real appearance in the film, his discussion with his father not only absurdly suggests that real men make their own beef jerky and go on riverboat gambling trips but also that his own excessive signifiers of masculinity make him irresistible to any woman.

Despite their beginning the film in static and binary gender positions, both characters occupy the pre-adolescent and pre-Oedipal space of Freud's definition of bisexuality. Even though both characters are engaged in what appear to be strictly heterosexually defined activities, both still fit into the category of polymorphous sexuality. More to the point, they have no idea what they are doing. The best evidence of this is when Dale has an unexpected first sexual encounter with Alice but is seemingly traumatized rather than invigorated by the experience. Furthermore, when Dale is beaten up by the local schoolyard bully, his claims to conforming to the "manly" are undermined, and his bravado is revealed to be a performance of gendered masculinity. Indeed, as Judith Butler (1993) illustrates in her important studies, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* "[p]erformativity is thus not a singular 'act,'" but rather a "reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (p. 12). This is one of the more important contribution of the bromance, as it presents new performative "repetitions" and different citations of manliness (as Butler would have it), positioning Dale and Brennan as performers of a different mode of masculinity that is contingent on the circumstances of this new history.

Returning to the issue of narrative, we can see that the film follows the standard meet-cute formula, albeit modified by having two men in the leading roles. Dale and Brennan hate each other on sight, and engage in the verbal sparring that Shumway characterizes as consistent with "foreplay" in screwball comedies. Like *It Happened One Night* and *Planes Trains and Automobiles*, Ferrell and Reilly are inexplicably forced to sleep in the same room together, emulating the classical form and its allusions to post-Hays code sex. This trading of insults eventually results in the front yard fight that marks the ending of the first act of the film. The stepbrothers are eventually grounded for their actions, further inflaming their mutual hatred for one another.

The first turning point in the film occurs when Brennan's younger, more successful brother Derek enters the scene, enticing the couple to rally against an external obstacle and find common ground. Derek's arrogance, his mean spirit, and his business-infused masculinity remind us that the romantic comedy often deals with issues of social class, particularly the relationships between the "rich" and the "poor." When he antagonizes Brennan, because he does not have a job, Brennan punches him in the face, marking the first moment of common ground between the duo. Like other classical romantic comedies, this is also the moment where the characters first "get together" as revealed with the film's ensuing "best friend's montage." Here, Brennan and Dale actually understand how much they have in common with each other. The transformative aspect here is that the pair engage in activities that seem innocent, but also demonstrate sexual behavior. Their conversation exudes sexual ambivalence and is deliberately polymorphous, as they ask each other questions about what their "[f]avorite non-pornographic magazine to masturbate to" as well as whom they would sleep with if they were a girl (John Stamos). Upon learning the answers to these questions, they

decide that they are obviously “best friends.” The next scene, placed where the initial love scene would take place in the traditional romantic comedy, presents us instead with a montage of activities, beginning with childish ones like “karate in the garage,” and the explosive results of mints in coke. The sequence turns strange as Dale and Brennan have a “swordfight” while urinating in the same toilet bowl as well as measuring and comparing their penis sizes. At the same time, the scene is another example of the ways in which the bromance incorporates multiple reading strategies into its narrative and accounting for its broad reception, as harmless comedy or scathing critique.

The third act of the film presents its most clear critique of the rampant misogynist and homophobic business culture, where Brennan is forced to go work with his brother and his boorish compatriots. Not only do they decry Brennan as gay, but their over-determined performance of masculinity includes calls to violent acts, and at its most extreme, another character’s literal threat of eating a penis. Brennan initially gets the job as a helicopter salesman (a ridiculous profession if there ever was one) to earn money and win the respect of his parents. Similarly, Brennan sets up a catering business, also which caters to the ultra-wealthy. This particular office setting is a hyper-masculinized space, where the businessmen literally threaten each other with violence and where someone as sensitive as Brennan is an underdog. Thus, the viewer roots for Brennan because he is the underdog but also because he embodies different sets of values. The viewer’s alignment with Brennan against these salesmen alerts us to the film’s critique, as well as the presentation of other gender roles and types, some more desirable as role models than others. Derek is the main source of this critique, as his boorish behavior includes browbeating his wife and influencing his children to do much of the same to their mother. This victimization of Alice (Kathryn Hahn) is part of the film’s main strategy, as well as the inclusion of a secondary character, Randy (Rob Riggle), who not only threatens Brennan with violence but is easily the meanest character of the bunch—actively making fun of Brennan and Dale and offering a not-so-subtle villain for the audience to root against. That Brennan must either successfully pull off the “Catalina Wine mixer” business event or be fired provides the film with its ticking clock scenario as it moves into the third and final act.

The climax of the film is where *Step Brothers* becomes its most utopian and allegorical. After having proven to themselves and their parents that they can make it in the real world, organizing the Catalina Wine mixer, Dale and Brennan reunite to perform a synthesis of *Por ti Volare* and their own composition of what could be the contemporary capitalist anthem (as interpreted by adolescents), “Boats and Hoes.” As Brennan sings in “the voice of an angel,” the other characters in the movie literally experience their own utopian fantasies that are all prompted by the song. Just as important is the idea that both Brennan and Dale’s success at this event is not only based on their coming together again as a couple, but embracing the qualities that got them into trouble in the first place. Dr. Doback’s rousing speech at the beginning of the scene is also interesting, insofar as it reveals that he did not, in fact, want to become a doctor, but a dinosaur instead. Though the story is completely nonsensical, it also serves the purpose of telling Dale to reject the patriarchy and structure inherent in capitalist obligation and to pursue his partnership with Brennan instead. In other words, the

message of the film would seem to be ultimately to be yourself, whatever that happens to mean.

That the film does not end in a marriage, but rather the reuniting of Dale and Brennan also alerts us to the possibilities for different outcomes that do not involve marriage within romantic comedies. In addition, it may also point to the new bonds that increasingly suggest that the dominance of one particular mode of marriage (between a man and a woman) can accommodate newer conventions, and that film reflects this possibility by having Dale and Brennan end up happy together.

Conclusion

Step Brothers has something important to offer audiences, particularly as it introduces and perpetuates male protagonists whose chief qualities are sweetness, remaining true to their core personality traits and love rather than reinforcing heterosexual marriage, patriarchy, and capitalism. Combining the bromance and screwball comedy, the film teaches us that there can be a balance between the masculine and feminine traits within a single person, as well as love between men without the consequences of judgment from society. These are valuable contributions to society, however they are presented.

Recalling Michael Kimmel's (1996) quote that began this essay, that "the history of men *as men* has yet to be written," (p. 5) perhaps we can also state that only recently have men been able to see different versions of themselves that are relatable and diverse. Recent feminist scholarship also offers a recipe for men wishing to free themselves of the burdens of patriarchy. Contemporary books related to the representation of men in film—including Drucilla Cornell's (2009) important work on Clint Eastwood, Dennis Bingham's (1994) analysis of the star personas of Jimmy Stewart and Jack Nicholson, as well as Derek Nystrom's (2009) analysis of class and gender binaries in the 1970s—are good starting points, but do not yet get us to where we need to be. In my view, such a project would look at all the material, especially that of the "lower" forms such as comedies to see what audiences are watching and why it appeals to them.

The screwball bromance, and *Step Brothers*, represents a small step in a positive direction by presenting men to themselves at their most ridiculous and certainly their least patriarchal. The fact that the film is a love story between two older, not traditionally attractive men opens up further possibilities for men to express their love to each other, something that has been implicitly repressed in films which perpetuate the myth that there is merely one type of manliness to aspire to. Since masculinity in Hollywood has predominantly favored the strong and the silent types, the presence of "man" at the end of the phrase "I love you" spoken between protagonists does not rule out that a significant change has taken place within this wave of films. Men admitting their love for one another *is* progress, as are the constantly evolving representations of men in films such as *Step Brothers* and elsewhere.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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